SYNCHRONIZING AUTHORIAL AND TEXTUAL AUTHORITY

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There are times when an author's individual authority does not match the type of authority attributed to the text they have written. Against a background of growing preoccupation with the identity and therefore the authority of 'the author' in eighteenth-century England, this essay argues that the authority ascribed to a text can be such that people find themselves forced to ascribe prevalent notions of authority to its author as well in order to make their involvement in the text's creation socially acceptable.

In eighteenth-century England, authorship became a viable, respectable profession, yet authors recognised that it was not their work, but their identity as an author that could help them gain appreciation and acclaim. They therefore turned the author into a figure that could be staged and advertised according to one's aim in print.[1] Authors developed authorial personae on paper, so-called *eidolons* that represented the ideal of the author, rather than their personal character or background, and granted them a certain kind of authority that they might not actually have possessed in real life. There was a downside to the wider public's interest in the author as an individual: It was no longer just textual content but also the author's persona that was being analysed.[2] Those who wanted to challenge authors' views could now attack their eidolons instead of their writing, since a written work's authority hinged on how its author performed the idealised role of the author.[3] Authors therefore had to carefully construct and exercise the authoritative identities they created on paper. The idealised visions of authorship reflected by eidolons imply that authors were envisioned as being educated, upper-class men, although explicit counter ideals to the English gentleman, such as midwives, transvestites, female virgins, and even talking parrots were produced in much smaller quantities as well.[4]

Taking this preoccupation with the identity and authority of the author into consideration, it might not be a coincidence that it was not until more than two hundred years after his death that anyone questioned whether William Shakespeare (1564-1616) had written the plays that to this point had been attributed to him. The earliest claim disputing Shakespeare's authorship was recorded in 1785, when James Wilmot, a scholar who lived near Stratford, Shakespeare's place of birth and death, looked for local remains of Shakespeare's written works, but could find no evidence that Shakespeare had ever been an author. He thought that Sir Francis Bacon was the most likely candidate to have written the plays, but never published this theory and even burnt all his notes.[5] However, he did tell a fellow researcher named James Corton Cowell about his suspicions, and Cowell gave a seminar in 1805 in which he said that, while the writings of Shakespeare demonstrate long and extensive education, travel, and association with scholars, 'there is nothing in the known life of Shakespeare that shows he had any of these qualities'.[6] The discussion about Shakespeare's authorship only really hit its stride half a century later: Since 1850, thousands of academic texts have been produced suggesting that someone else than Shakespeare wrote his plays.

Two shifts in the dynamic between text, authorship, and authority can be identified between Shakespeare's death and the 19th century. First, until the late 18th century people seem to have been more interested in the works produced by Shakespeare than in the man behind the plays. Secondly, it was only when the figure of the author emerged as a separate authority, despite remaining intrinsically linked to the authority of written texts, that so-called 'Anti-Stratfordians', who believed in alternate authorship theories, began arguing that Shakespeare's education was not good enough to have allowed him to capture the themes and settings in the works ascribed to him. By the early 19th century, the authority of Shakespeare's works had shifted into a form that did not correspond with people's view of the writings of common, uneducated people. Indeed, Shakespeare was arguably 'authorised' between 1660 and 1760; it was not just his works but also his authorial figure that were canonised in this period, to the point that Shakespeare became a quintessential figure of literary authority in England.[7] In order for Shakespeare to be an authorial figure, some people evidently needed him to conform to their personal view of what an influential author represents.

Naturally, this view differs depending on notions of authority at a given time.

In contrast to the Shakespeare authorship question, discussions regarding the authorship of *Frankenstein* have taken place ever since the novel was first published anonymously in 1818.[8] Its author, Mary Shelley, was well aware of people's scrutiny of authors and advertised, so to speak, her intellectual acquaintances in the dedication: 'To William Godwin, Author of *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams*, &c'.[9] One can think of various reasons why Shelley wanted to remain anonymous: She may have been wary of being associated with a novel that suggests life can be created through science; she may not have wanted to come off as too presumptuous as a female author; or she may have believed that the work would be taken more seriously if people believed it had been written by a man. Reviewers of the novel, intrigued by its anonymous author, speculated about who it might be, and saw instant parallels to the work of Godwin, Shelley's father, and the writing of Percy Bysshe, Shelley's husband.[10] The notion that some ideas of the men Shelley knew so well are present in the novel is not particularly surprising, but one wonders whether these parallels would have been drawn as quickly had Shelley not mentioned her father in the dedication.

Reviewers' immediate assumption that *Frankenstein*'s author was male, even when the identity of the author was still unknown, reflects the association between authorship and masculinity at the time. Even after Shelley's name appeared on later editions in 1823 and 1831, there were those who continued to believe that her husband was the creative mind behind *Frankenstein* – and some people still do, as illustrated by John Lauritsen's *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein* (2007). The book argues that 'an uneducated, teenaged girl' could not have produced a novel such as *Frankenstein*, but that Bysshe, 'one of the greatest poets and prose stylists in the English language' could easily have been the author.[11] Granted, the majority of Shelley scholars do believe that *Frankenstein* is Shelley's work, and that her husband inspired and aided her in the creative process, but there is still disagreement about the extent of Bysshe's involvement in the novel. This debate illustrates that it apparently matters whether and to which *exact* extent Shelley's husband inspired her ideas, even though this question may not have been posed with regard to Shelley's creative influence had her husband's name been on the cover

from the start.

Naturally, there is a direct correlation between the amount of attention a literary work receives and the amount of critical analysis it attracts. Authors whose works are widely read are more prone to scrutiny than others. However, the above examples clearly hint at scepticism towards the role of the marginalised author in the production of a socially authoritative text. In both cases, it was only after the wider public became interested in the role of the author and after the authors' works became widely read that attempts were made to actively reconstruct the authority of the author in order to make it match social norms of authority. As illustrated by the centuries-old preoccupation with the identities of the creators behind Shakespeare and Shelley's works, authorities have historically played an integral role in ascribing authority to authors of canonical works who would not have been considered as authoritative by the standards of said authorities' time.

Notes.

1   Powell, Manushag N. *Performing Authorship in Eighteenth-Century English Periodicals*. Bucknell: Bucknell UP, 2012. Print. 14.
2   Ibid. 33-34.
3   Ibid. 20.
4   Ibid. 35.
5   Shapiro, James. *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. Print. 3.
6   Ibid.
7   Dobson, Michael. *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Print. 1.
8   Seymour, Miranda. *Mary Shelley*. New York: Grove Press, 2002. Print. 195.
9   Clemit, Pamela. 'Frankenstein, *Matilda*, and the legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft'. *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Ed. Esther Schor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print. 26-44, 26.
10 Ibid. 27.
11 Howard, Jennifer. 'The Birth of Frankenstein'. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 55.11 (2008): n.pag. Web. 28 November 2015.